

## Rita Walters

I am a licensed social worker and currently teach as a clinical instructor at Michigan State University in the School of Social Work and College of Medicine Master of Public Health program. I'm also a PhD candidate at Michigan State University School of Social Work. My dissertation research is titled, *Adjustment and Coping of African American Parents of Children with Severe Cerebral Palsy*. As a disability advocate, I serve on the Advisory Council for the State of Michigan Children Special Health Care Services and Wayne State University Developmental Disabilities Institute. My husband, Ellington, II is a Sergeant First Class of the Michigan Army National Guard. We are parents to an 8-year-old son, Ellington, III and 14-year-old daughter, Alexy.

Alexy has severe cerebral palsy. She is completely dependent – non-ambulatory, non-verbal, vision and hearing impaired, incontinent, and relies on a feeding tube for nutrition. The day-to-day care of Alexy is physically demanding and emotionally overwhelming. As my husband serves in the Michigan Army National Guard, he has been deployed to the Middle East twice for 12-month long assignments within the last five years. The absence of her father in addition to her daily health challenges is very taxing for Alexy emotionally and mentally. Although my husband and I are both employed and have medical insurance – it does not cover all of Alexy's necessary medical care and health-related supplies. For example, incontinence supplies are not a benefit of her insurance. Our monthly out-of-pocket cost for these supplies alone is about \$430.00. Our yearly out-of-pocket expenses directly relating to Alexy's medical care and treatment is about \$15,00.00 – this include insurance premiums, co-pays, medication, supplies, equipment, and transportation.

Alexy would greatly benefit from mental health services. Although she may not have the capacity to verbalize her emotional and mental stresses, they are very self-evident. The cost to provide this level of service/support to our daughter is also not covered benefit of our insurance. And as much as it pains us to admit, my husband and I do not have the financial resources to invest in mental health treatment. Mental health parity that is inclusive of all disabilities would be a great benefit to our daughter and family.